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ABSTRACT

Research on spoken discourse that was conducted for three master's theses at the University of Oulu is summarized. The studies were as follows: (1) an examination of linguistic strategies realized in business negotiations, based on an analysis of six recordings of simulated negotiations between eight Finnish engineers and a native speaker of English; (2) an analysis of telephone conversations between a group of Finnish employees and a native speaker of English, in which the gambit classification of Edmondson and House was used to study conversation management and gambits with reference to turns, topic transitions, and mitigation; and (3) a study of various areas of social competence (activity, idiomaticity, orientation, and politeness) based on informal conversations between Finnish engineers and researchers and a native speaker of English. Results of the business negotiation study showed that Finnish subjects were unaware of the importance of chat in the English-speaking culture. In the telephone conversation study, shortcomings in the Finnish subjects' operational language use (i.e., their ability to manipulate the flow of the conversation toward a goal while the interaction was in progress) were found. The informal conversation study showed a low level of relative activity and initiative of the Finnish participants. Contains 3 references. (LB)

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SPOKEN DISCOURSE OF FINNISH SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

The present report is based on three M.A. theses written as part of a study project at the English Department, University of Oulu. The project was conducted in cooperation with three companies in the Oulu district, under the supervision of Professor Heikki Nyssönen in 1988-89.

The first study aimed at examining linguistic strategies realized in business negotiations. This was done by applying Lampi's (1986) and Johnston's (1981) models of analysis to a corpus consisting of six recordings of simulated business negotiations between eight Rautaruukki engineers and a native speaker of English.

Another study consisted of an analysis of telephone conversations between a group of Nokia Cellular Systems employees and a native speaker of English. These were studied in terms of conversation management and gambits with reference to turns, topic transitions, and mitigation. The analysis was based on the gambit classification of Edmondson & House (1981).

The third study focused on various areas of social competence: activity, idiomaticity, orientation and politeness. The data consisted of informal conversations between Veitsiluoto Oy marketing engineers and researchers and a native speaker of English. The models applied in the study of activity were taken from Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Stenström (1984) and Holmen (1985). The remaining aspects were based on Cowie (1988), Brown (1977), Brown & Levinson (1987) and Scollon & Scollon (1983).

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The study of business negotiations was focused on negotiation strategies, and specifically, their linguistic manifestations on the level of acts and conversational moves. The strategies in the negotiations were divided into cooperative, competitive or submissive strategies. The hypothesis for the study was that negotiators normally aim at a cooperative negotiation strategy.

The telephone conversations were analysed as regards conversation management and gambits with reference to turns, topic transitions, and mitigation. The calls were categorised into openings, small talk sections, subject matter sections and closings. The use of various gambits was studied as far as their operational use. The subjects were placed on a scale of proficiency levels according to their use of various gambits.

The informal conversations were examined in four different areas of social interaction: activity, orientation, idiomaticity and politeness. In order to study the degree of activity of each speaker the exchange structure of each conversation was analysed. The non-natives were also examined for the non-idiomatic features and the use of orientation in their speech. The politeness phenomena were studied as regards the quality and distribution of various politeness strategies.

Methods

The model of negotiation strategy analysis was based on Johnston's (1981) division of negotiation strategies into three groups: competitive, cooperative and submissive strategies. The macrostructural level of study followed Lampi (1986), who divides negotiations into three phases: a chat, a discussion and a bargaining phase.

In the study of telephone conversations the interest lay in conversation management, leading the conversation to a potential goal. The categorisation as regards initiating a conversation, alternating turns, changing topics, closing a topic and closing a conversation was performed according to Sacks, Schegloff

and Jefferson (1974). The model for the organisation of turns was taken from Poyatos (1980) and the gambit classification from Edmondson & House (1981).

The degree of activity of each speaker in the informal conversations was arrested on the basis of the model proposed by Holmen (1985). The exchange structure of each conversation was analyzed on the model of Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) and Stenström (1984). The theoretical background for the study of non-idiomatic features in the data was based on Cowie (1988) and the study of orientation was on Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) and Brown (1977). The analysis of the politeness strategies followed the frameworks outlined in Brown & Levinson (1987) and Scollon & Scollon (1983).

Material

The negotiation strategy study concerned nine male subjects, a native speaker of English and eight Finnish Rautaruukki engineers, ranging from design engineers to engineers in sales and purchase duties. The simulated situation was a business negotiation.

The telephone conversations included 16 employees from Nokia Cellular Systems and a non-native speaker of English. This set-up was selected as it was regarded as a very demanding one by the engineers involved.

In the third study the ten Finnish subjects were Veitsiluoto Oy employees. Seven of these non-native speakers of English were male and three of them female. Half of them worked as engineers in marketing duties and the other half as researchers. The conversations were simulated task-oriented discussions.

Results of the three studies

1. Business negotiations

The study of the negotiations showed that the Finnish subjects were unaware of the importance of chat in the English-speaking culture, since the chat phases were short and few. The general difficulty posed by such social conversation in

a foreign language is a contributing factor. Also, the Finns were rather passive in participating in the conversation, which was reflected by their frequent use of *acknowledge* instead of a more emphatic and "involved" response. The lack of *mitigation* and *emphasis* on the part of the non-natives made them sound unnecessarily and in many cases unintentionally impolite and evasive. The failure of the Finns to cooperate sometimes led to the use of more aggressive-seeming strategies, such as *threat*, *demand*, *attack* and *commitment* both by the native and the non-native speakers, which in turn could cause trouble in the flow of communication. The Finns also found it difficult to use *self* and *other* supports. See also Figure 1.

2. Telephone dialogues

In the telephone dialogues there were shortcomings in the Finnish subjects' operational language use, ie. in their ability to manipulate the flow of the conversation towards a goal while the interaction was in progress. They tended to act as secondary participants in the conversation providing a minimum amount of information. This was supported by the dominance of hearer-supportive gambits and by the fact that most of the initiations for the topic changes were made by the native speaker. The almost total absence of speaker-oriented, message-oriented or turnkeeping gambits in an idiomatic format was also indicative of insufficient operational language use. The general overuse of hesitation indicators can perhaps be regarded as a sign of limited active vocabulary and inability to control the turn distribution in a conversation.

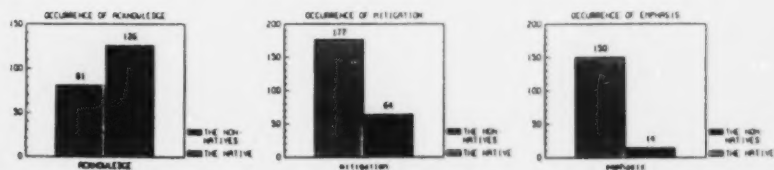


Figure 1. Results of the study of negotiations and telephone dialogues.

The opening and closing phases caused problems for many of the non-natives. The openings tended to be too direct as the Finnish speakers did not voluntarily introduce any small talk. Several instances of lacking mitigation as well as pragmatic failure were identified, but these did not prevent the conversation from proceeding in most cases.

3. Informal conversations

In the study of the informal conversations the relative activity and initiative of the Finnish participants appeared low. All too often the native speaker was left "in charge" of making the first moves whereas the non-native speakers mainly confined themselves to producing responses which were not always of the appropriate kind. The follow-ups, or signals of feedback, often constituted a major part of the Finnish speakers' moves, i.e. they preferred to participate by giving feedback, not by taking initiative.

The idiomatic use of language was studied by taking into account both contextually and semantically unidiomatic phrases. The analysis showed that the more a speaker had defects in his grammatical competence, the more errors he made in the use of semantically specified idioms.

In the study of general orientation to the conversation the Finnish speakers were assessed according to their degree of activity. In general the non-native speakers tended to produce their own formulations, instead of repeating the native speaker's "ready-made" phrases or instead of trying to adopt those phrases to suit the context. Seven out of ten subjects failed to signal a satisfying amount of convergence, giving an impression of a non-supportive participant.

The use of politeness strategies was considered an important area of social competence. In the business talk sections the subjects tended to confine themselves almost entirely to using negative politeness strategies in order to mitigate the potential threat of their utterances. Thus, they discarded the possibility to convey a friendlier and more solidary attitude by employing more positive politeness strategies. This seems to be a general trend in such situations: for a Finnish speaker in a NS-NNS context the switch of code entails a switch of 'mode'. The reasons presumably are partly cultural, partly linguistic,

the general tendency of the Finn being to solve a communication problem through the interlanguage rather than through the target language system.

See also Figure 2.

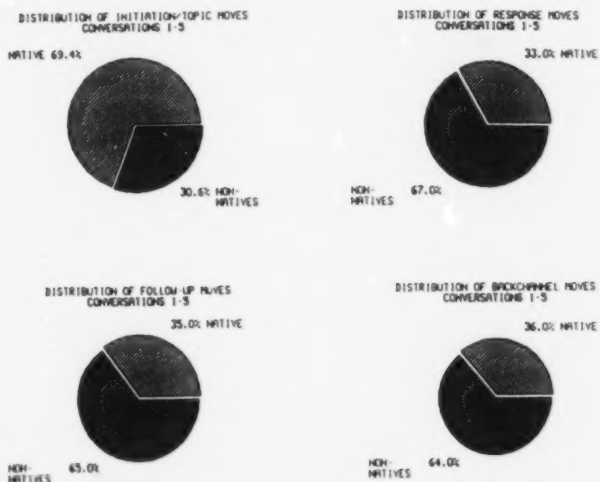


Figure 2. Results of the study of informal conversations.

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